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Fruit Trees and Tamarisk Brooms: Grafting a Unique Perspective of American History in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

Willa Cather reveals an obsession with both personal and social history in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. She sees the recounting of history, to use Herbert Butterfield's words, as a creative act of translation. Cather challenges received notions of the past, which she sees as being as flawed as memory itself, by writing a revisionist version of American history in this novel. Employing the unique metaphor of grafting fruit trees, Cather produces new varieties of Americans in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* that highlight her unique perspective on the formation of America. The unusual viewpoint Cather gives the history of the New Mexico territory provides a new historical framework with which to explore her fiction.

Death Comes for the Archbishop is set in possibly the most extreme frontier setting that Willa Cather could choose. Frederick Turner, a well-known historian contemporary to Cather, passes over the New Mexico region in his writings about the American West. When he describes ideas moving from former settlements to even newer communities, they move from the Carolinas, to Iowa, and finally to California, without accounting for all the country between (Turner). In fact, Cather's novel could be read as a direct response to the "zeitgeist" or Euro-centric reading Turner imposes on the West. In one of his early articles on the topic of the American West printed in the 1896 Atlantic Monthly, Turner describes a rift between frontier Americans and their European roots:

"The separation of the Western man from the seaboard, and his environment, made him in a large degree free from European precedents and forces. He looked at things independently and with small regard or appreciation for the best Old World experience" (Turner). The historian claims that the more wild surroundings in western America separate a settler from the legacy of his European roots. Despite this disconnection between pioneers and their roots, in the 1921 printing of Turner's *The Frontier in American History*, he describes the people of the Middle West in terms of their European heritage: German, Irish, and Scandinavian. He goes on to write that "there was the creation of a new type, which was neither the sum of all its elements, nor a complete fusion in a melting pot" that came about when the different cultures got together in the new location of an uncivilized outer boundary of America (Frontier, XIII). This later version of Turner's writing shows that he believes that some of the components from people's past remain in a diverse community of settlers, but he still believes that the end result is a completely different type of person from Eastern American and Europeans.

Cather develops a fiction that relies on the close relationship a French Bishiop has with his European roots. Her perception that the history of a civilization makes up individual people as much as those same people make up a civilization is evident in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Social traditions form a foundation that is a form of memory inherent in the varied cultures she brings together in the text. She describes a new variety of American coming forth that is similar to the new type Turner offers, but allows native Indians and Mexicans to be included in the mix. Read in contrast with Turner's ideas about the American West, Cather takes a fresh stance on the historical development of a portion of the new American territories. Turner reports that the

Superintendent of the 1890 Census officially declared the frontier closed. The administrator claims that "up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement" but that by 1890 there was no longer a clear line separating civilization from unsettled areas (Frontier, I). Cather gives precise dates only a few times throughout *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, opening in Rome in 1848, and then jumping to the bishop's arrival in New Mexico in 1851. The work is remarkably absent of dates until the final book which describes a December 1888 letter that allows readers to calculate that the Archbishop died in 1889, well into the frontier-ending decade that the Superintendent of the 1890 Census describes. Her tale of a new version of American history is framed within the boundaries of a government-declared end to frontiers in America. Cather selects a bygone time of expansion into unknown portions of the country to present a more ethnically diverse vantage of the development of American identity.

The question of national identity takes center stage in this novel about settling a wild frontier. From the question of who will be the missionary priest to the prejudices of a wayward church within the diocese, people judge others' capabilities and political opinions by their heritage. When deciding who should be the bishop in the newly annexed lands of New Mexico, the Cardinal, with some humor, agrees that the French make the best missionaries for their organizing skills while the Spaniards were good martyrs and the Germans are better classifiers (280). He decides the jurisdiction over a country larger than Europe, without Russia, based on the generalizations he feels confident making about a national way of life. The new French Bishop, lost in his first trip in the territory, stumbles across a Mexican settlement that provides him sustenance. He asks if they've guessed he is a Frenchman and they can only reply that they were

certain he was not American because American means Protestant in their minds. In a letter to his brother, he claims he must be an American in his speech, his thought, and even his heart which is a "business man" act. Only in the evenings when he dons his cassock does he feel like a priest and Frenchman again (297). Later, when Bishop Latour visits the largest and richest parish in his diocese, he reflects that the priest and people are "hostile to Americans...any European, except a Spaniard, was regarded as a gringo" (361). When the bishop finally replaces Padre Martinez, he recognizes that he must replace the priest with a Spaniard rather than with his usual French missionaries because the people in that parish would not accept a white man to lead them. A regular theme throughout the novel is the original heritage of people who have moved to this territory. Cather recognizes that only the Indians are indigenous people and that everyone else identifies with another background unrelated to the spectacular landscape and Indian ways. Latour considers that none of the Europeans or Mexicans could understand the workings of the Indian mind (358) showing that Cather recognizes her story as a historical moment of myriad ethnic and cultural backgrounds learning to live together despite their diverse cultures.

Bishop Latour finds himself falling into memories of his European childhood while in America. On his first morning back in Santa Fe after the long journey to prove his authority, the bishop awakens to an unexpected Angelus. There was no working bell when he left, and the tones give him the sudden sense he is lodging in Rome again. Once before, he was thrown back to Europe from the familiarity of an American scene. In New Orleans the smell of mimosa swept him back to a garden in the south of France where he recovered from an illness as a child (302). These flashbacks show an interchangeability

between American and European scenes for the missionary priest. They highlight that a person's connection with his personal history is not lost with a change of environment. Acacia trees also remind him of the south of France. Not long after he rides past some of these trees, he has a conversation with his Indian guide, Jacinto, which emphasizes the critical role personal memory plays in making up a person and a new community. The Bishop contemplates that "there was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him" (332). By adding the opinion that Jacinto's upbringing had trained him to meet any situation that might confront him, the bishop confirms that his European background is not necessarily superior to Jacinto's Indian experience (333). The same opinion is returned when Cather allows us into Jacinto's point of view long enough to show his admiration that the bishop does not put on "false face" when speaking with Indians (333). The bishop treats all the people with basic dignity and respect. At the same time, Cather affords her characters the same kind of deference by validating subordinate perspectives like Jacinto's. She emphasizes the Frenchman's and Indian's memories as a diverging point in their similarity. While they share a present life in the New Mexico territory where Latour feels he is gaining Jacinto's friendship without knowing how (333), the disparate experiences they each bring to the moment ultimately guarantees they cannot fully understand each other. Instead Cather develops the idea that some of the characters' heritages will form the dominant roots of the area and the community of people will grow from a borrowed legacy.

Cather weaves the idea of cultivating fruit trees throughout the novel, drawing a metaphor between the fruit brought from Europe and the new Americans being made in the diocese. Latour notes half-dead peach trees in the enclosed garden of the deserted cloister on the mesa at Acoma. Nearly 150 years prior, a greedy priest had forced the Indians to provide water, their most precious commodity, for his garden. Eventually they overthrew the priest and his trees are the "kind of unlikely tree that grows up from an old root and never bears" (339). In a connection with missionary priest's desire to cultivate believers, the peach trees bear witness to the Spaniard's early, failed presence with the Acomas. The Bishop established a garden of fruit trees with switches brought from St. Louis at his residence in Santa Fe. Within six years, cuttings from them were already bearing fruit in Mexican gardens (398). By his retirement, Latour bought a home based on 200-year-old apricot trees that signaled the site as a perfect place for an orchard. He recommended that new priests plant fruit trees wherever they went, encouraging Mexicans to add fruit to their diets. He quotes Pascal to his students: "Man was lost and saved in a garden" (438). Contrasting with Latour, Father Valliant preferred the tamarisk tree. Also an import, but from a much older history of Spaniards, the "long brooms of lavender-pink blossoms...had been the companion of his wanderings" (398-99). Bishop Latour labors to set down cultivated roots while Father Valliant loves the trees he finds as he ministers to outlying communities. Latour's own experiences during his long tour as bishop then archbishop of the diocese proved the fruit tree metaphor to be true. When Padre Martinez disagreed with the bishop, he claimed that his parish's religion "grew out of the soil and has its own roots" as opposed to roots from Rome (366). In a reference to grafting, he claims that the church planted by Franciscan fathers has been cut off and his

church is "the second growth, and is indigenous" (366). Martinez develops a mutation or new variety of church that ultimately withers away when grafted away from its original roots.

Keeping in mind Turner's comment that the new frontier communities are neither a melting pot nor a complete sum of all of its parts, Cather's use of fruit trees allows another kind of metaphor to describe the variety of American developing in Bishop Latour's diocese. In her 1918 novel, *My Ántonia*, she reveals her knowledge about grafting by Ántonia's comment that her husband worked the orange groves of California, learned grafting, and no neighbor's orchards bear fruit like their's (*My Ántonia* 219). A closer look at the art of grafting fruit trees shows that a graft from one part of a tree is added to another so that it shares the root system of the tree it is added to. The cultivar or new variety of fruit usually can only be produced by grafting; a different form of fruit will grow from the seeds of the new variety (Wienmann). Cather sees the new people coming together in the New Mexico territory as feeding out of the root of the Catholic Church, but forming new varieties of Americans who cannot be reproduced by their children. The roots of the tree composing the different grafts and varieties are the cultural heritage and experience of Europeans like Bishop Latour who influence how Mexicans, Indians, and Americans develop as he grafts them into his Catholicism. Just as he reflected with Jacinto, though, they can never intimately know the experience that he brings as the rooted tree. They draw nourishment and growth from his experiences, without consciousness of the source. At the same time, the new Americans, in the form of the Indian, Mexican, and American children, would not become the same people their parents were without the influence of the church. The continual bond with their religion

helps build diverse varieties of Americans with Mexican, Indian, and Eastern American heritages that are grafted into the unique Catholicism in New Mexico.

Finally, Cather cannot separate her ideas about her characters' personal memories composing the history of a new region from her own experiences influencing the fiction she writes. Her personal narrative collected in *On Writing* reveals the tight connection between her personal experience and her fiction. She writes about *Death Comes for the Archbishop* that "many of the incidents [she] used were experiences of [her] own" (8). She claims that *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, notable for its lack of driving plot, is a "special genre," arguing that the act of writing this book was "a happy vacation from life, a return to childhood, to early memories" (11). Cather draws a correlation between her imagination and memory in the writing of the novel that explores the effects of personal and cultural memory on the outset of America. Kathleen Danker suggests that, while little direct evidence accounts for childhood memories of the French Catholics living only miles from Cather's childhood home, indirectly there is much reason to believe that Cather had been well-known to the French Canadian community (37). This association explains how developing the priests Latour and Valliant corresponds with memories about priests Cather knew when growing up. Her acquaintance with priests along with her interest in the Catholic Church helps link her novel with her memories. Later experiences in her life also influenced the novel's direction.

According to John Murphy, Cather discovered the first Bishop of Denver's biography while visiting Santa Fe in 1925. He claims that "this work increased the interest she already had in Jean Lamy, first Bishop of Santa Fe, who had been Machebeuf's lifelong friend from their seminary days in France to their missionary work in Ohio and the Southwest" (Murphy). She attributes the novel to personal memories made in New Mexico

saying in an interview with *Superior Express* in 1928 that "I spent a large part of fifteen year in the southwest, living the life of the southwestern people. I have ridden thousands of miles on ranch ponies, and the experiences I have related in the stories to which you refer are not based upon fancies or upon reading of that territory and those people, but upon my own life and experiences there" (Bohlke 103). She professes in an interview with the San Francisco Chronicle in 1931 that she had no plan to write about the priests until, when reading the letters Machebeuf wrote his sister, the whole story formed in her mind. She claims that "the way of it was on the white wall of that hotel room in Santa Fe, as if it were all in order and color there, projected by a sort of magic lantern" (109). Cather's conscious association that her personal experiences helped draw forth *Death Comes for the Archbishop* shows how she knows personal memories and heritage influence the history of a region.

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From: Max Despain [mnkdespain@yahoo.com]
Sent: Wednesday, May 18, 2005 12:57 PM
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Attachments: 10th Intl Cather Seminar Paper June 2005.doc

Dear AFIT PA,

I am an English Literature PhD student (and public affairs officer ☺). I have a literary paper I am presenting at a conference in June. I only have adobe reader, so I can fill out the form, but I would have to fax it to you. I tried going to the http://www.afit.mil/newsrm01.htm website but it wouldn't connect.

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Major Martha J. "Max" Despain

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